CyberView 1991

Bruce Sterling

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- Bruce Sterling

Bruce Sterling
CyberView 1991

They called it "CyberView '91." Actually, it was another "SummerCon" -- the traditional summer gathering of the American hacker underground. The organizer, 21 year old "Knight Lightning," had recently beaten a Computer Fraud and Abuse rap that might have put him in jail for thirty years. A little discretion seemed in order.

The convention hotel, a seedy but accommodating motor-inn outside the airport in St Louis, had hosted SummerCons before. Changing the name had been a good idea. If the staff were alert, and actually recognized that these were the same kids back again, things might get hairy.

The SummerCon '88 hotel was definitely out of bounds. The US Secret Service had set up shop in an informant's room that year, and videotaped the drunken antics of the now globally notorious "Legion of Doom" through a one-way mirror. The running of SummerCon '88 had constituted a major count of criminal conspiracy against young Knight Lightning, during his 1990 federal trial.

That hotel inspired sour memories. Besides, people already got plenty nervous playing "hunt the fed" at SummerCon gigs. SummerCons generally featured at least one active federal informant. Hackers and phone phreaks like to talk a lot. They talk about phones and computers -- and about each other.

For insiders, the world of computer hacking is a lot like Mexico. There's no middle class. There's a million little kids screwing around with their modems, trying to snitch long-distance phone-codes, trying to swipe pirated software -- the "kodez kidz" and "warez doodz." They're peons, "rodents." Then there's a few earnest wannabes, up-and-comers, pupils. Not many. Less of 'em every year, lately.

And then there's the heavy dudes. The players. The Legion of Doom are definitely heavy. Germany's Chaos Computer Club are very heavy, and already back out on parole after their dire flirtation with the KGB. The Masters of Destruction in New York are a pain in the ass to their rivals in the underground, but ya gotta admit they are heavy. MoD's "Phiber Optik" has almost completed his public-service sentence, too... "Phoenix" and his crowd down in Australia used to be heavy, but nobody's heard much out of "Nom" and "Electron" since the Australian heat came down on them.

The people in Holland are very active, but somehow the Dutch hackers don't quite qualify as "heavy." Probably because computer-hacking is legal in Holland, and therefore nobody ever gets busted for

it. The Dutch lack the proper bad attitude, somehow.

America 's answer to the Dutch menace began arriving in a steady confusion of airport shuttle buses and college-kid decaying junkers. A software pirate, one of the more prosperous attendees, flaunted a radar-detecting black muscle-car. In some dim era before the jet age, this section of St Louis had been a mellow, fertile Samuel Clemens landscape. Waist-high summer weeds still flourished beside the four-lane highway and the airport feeder roads.

The graceless CyberView hotel had been slammed down onto this landscape as if dropped from a B-52. A small office-tower loomed in one corner beside a large parking garage. The rest was a rambling mess of long, narrow, dimly lit corridors, with a small swimming pool, a glass-fronted souvenir shop and a cheerless dining room. The hotel was clean enough, and the staff, despite provocation, proved adept at minding their own business. For their part, the hackers seemed quite fond of the place.

The term "hacker" has had a spotted history. Real "hackers," traditional "hackers," like to write software programs. They like to "grind code," plunging into its densest abstractions until the world outside the computer terminal bleaches away. Hackers tend to be portly white techies with thick fuzzy beards who talk entirely in jargon, stare into space a lot, and laugh briefly for no apparent reason. The CyberView crowd, though they call themselves "hackers," are better identified as computer intruders. They don't look, talk or act like 60s M.I.T.-style hackers.

Computer intruders of the 90s aren't stone pocket-protector techies. They're young white suburban males, and look harmless enough, but sneaky. They're much the kind of kid you might find skinny-dipping at 2AM in a backyard suburban swimming pool. The kind of kid who would freeze in the glare of the homeowner's flashlight, then frantically grab his pants and leap over the fence, leaving behind a half-empty bottle of tequila, a Metallica T-shirt, and, probably, his wallet.

One might wonder why, in the second decade of the personal-computer revolution, most computer intruders are still suburban teenage white whiz-kids. Hacking-as-computer-intrusion has been around long enough to have bred an entire generation of serious, heavy-duty adult computer-criminals. Basically, this simply hasn't occurred. Almost all computer intruders simply quit after age 22. They get bored with it, frankly. Sneaking around in other people's swimming pools simply loses its appeal. They get out of school. They get married. They buy their own swimming pools. They have to find some replica of a real life.

The Legion of Doom -- or rather, the Texas wing of LoD -- had hit

Saint Louis in high style, this weekend of June 22. The Legion of Doom has been characterized as "a high-tech street gang" by the Secret Service, but this is surely one of the leakiest, goofiest and best-publicized criminal conspiracies in American history.

Not much has been heard from Legion founder "Lex Luthor" in recent years. The Legion's Atlanta wing, "Prophet," "Leftist," and "Urvile," are just now getting out of various prisons and into Georgia halfway-houses. "Mentor" got married and writes science fiction games for a living.

But "Erik Bloodaxe," "Doc Holiday," and "Malefactor" were here -- in person, and in the current issues of TIME and NEWSWEEK. CyberView offered a swell opportunity for the Texan Doomsters to announce the formation of their latest high-tech, uhm, organization, "Comsec Data Security Corporation."

Comsec boasts a corporate office in Houston, and a marketing analyst, and a full-scale corporate computer-auditing program. The Legion boys are now digital guns for hire. If you're a well-heeled company, and you can cough up per diem and air-fare, the most notorious computer-hackers in America will show right up on your doorstep and put your digital house in order -- guaranteed.

Bloodaxe, a limber, strikingly handsome young Texan with shoulder-length blond hair, mirrored sunglasses, a tie, and a formidable gift of gab, did the talking. Before some thirty of his former peers, gathered upstairs over styrofoam coffee and canned Coke in the hotel's Mark Twain Suite, Bloodaxe sternly announced some home truths of modern computer security.

Most so-called "computer security experts" -- (Comsec's competitors) -- are overpriced con artists! They charge gullible corporations thousands of dollars a day, just to advise that management lock its doors at night and use paper shredders. Comsec Corp, on the other hand (with occasional consultant work from Messrs. "Pain Hertz" and "Prime Suspect") boasts America's most formidable pool of genuine expertise at actually breaking into computers.

Comsec, Bloodaxe continued smoothly, was not in the business of turning-in any former hacking compatriots. Just in case anybody here was, you know, worrying... On the other hand, any fool rash enough to challenge a Comsec-secured system had better be prepared for a serious hacker-to-hacker dust-up.

"Why would any company trust *you*?" someone asked languidly.

Malefactor, a muscular young Texan with close-cropped hair and the build of a linebacker, pointed out that, once hired, Comsec would be allowed inside the employer's computer system, and would have no reason at all to "break in." Besides, Comsec agents were to be licensed

and bonded.

Bloodaxe insisted passionately that LoD were through with hacking for good. There was simply no future in it. The time had come for LoD to move on, and corporate consultation was their new frontier. (The career options of committed computer intruders are, when you come right down to it, remarkably slim.) "We don't want to be flippin' burgers or sellin' life insurance when we're thirty," Bloodaxe drawled. "And wonderin' when Tim Foley is gonna come kickin' in the door!" (Special Agent Timothy M. Foley of the US Secret Service has fully earned his reputation as the most formidable anti-hacker cop in America.)

Bloodaxe sighed wistfully. "When I look back at my life... I can see I've essentially been in school for eleven years, teaching myself to be a computer security consultant."

After a bit more grilling, Bloodaxe finally got to the core of matters. Did anybody here hate them now? he asked, almost timidly. Did people think the Legion had sold out? Nobody offered this opinion. The hackers shook their heads, they looked down at their sneakers, they had another slug of Coke. They didn't seem to see how it would make much difference, really. Not at this point.

Over half the attendees of CyberView publicly claimed to be out of the hacking game now. At least one hacker present -- (who had shown up, for some reason known only to himself, wearing a blond wig and a dime-store tiara, and was now catching flung Cheetos in his styrofoam cup) -- already made his living "consulting" for private investigators.

Almost everybody at CyberView had been busted, had had their computers seized, or, had, at least, been interrogated -- and when federal police put the squeeze on a teenage hacker, he generally spills his guts.

By '87, a mere year or so after they plunged seriously into anti-hacker enforcement, the Secret Service had workable dossiers on everybody that really mattered. By '89, they had files on practically every last soul in the American digital underground. The problem for law enforcement has never been finding out who the hackers are. The problem has been figuring out what the hell they're really up to, and, harder yet, trying to convince the public that it's actually important and dangerous to public safety.

From the point of view of hackers, the cops have been acting wacky lately. The cops, and their patrons in the telephone companies, just don't understand the modern world of computers, and they're scared. "They think there are masterminds running spy-rings who employ us," a hacker told me. "They don't understand that we don't do this for money, we do it for power and knowledge." Telephone

security people who reach out to the underground are accused of divided loyalties and fired by panicked employers. A young Missourian coolly psychoanalyzed the opposition. "They're overdependent on things they don't understand. They've surrendered their lives to computers."

"Power and knowledge" may seem odd motivations. "Money" is a lot easier to understand. There are growing armies of professional thieves who rip-off phone service for money. Hackers, though, are into, well, power and knowledge. This has made them easier to catch than the street-hustlers who steal access codes at airports. It also makes them a lot scarier.

Take the increasingly dicey problems posed by "Bulletin Board Systems." "Boards" are home computers tied to home telephone lines, that can store and transmit data over the phone -- written texts, software programs, computer games, electronic mail. Boards were invented in the late 70s, and, while the vast majority of boards are utterly harmless, some few piratical boards swiftly became the very backbone of the 80s digital underground. Over half the attendees of CyberView ran their own boards. "Knight Lightning" had run an electronic magazine, "Phrack," that appeared on many underground boards across America.

Boards are mysterious. Boards are conspiratorial. Boards have been accused of harboring: Satanists, anarchists, thieves, child pornographers, Aryan nazis, religious cultists, drug dealers -- and, of course, software pirates, phone phreaks, and hackers. Underground hacker boards were scarcely reassuring, since they often sported terrifying sci-fi heavy-metal names, like "Speed Demon Elite," "Demon Roach Underground," and "Black Ice." (Modern hacker boards tend to feature defiant titles like "Uncensored BBS," "Free Speech," and "Fifth Amendment.")

Underground boards carry stuff as vile and scary as, say, 60s-era underground newspapers -- from the time when Yippies hit Chicago and ROLLING STONE gave away free roach-clips to subscribers. "Anarchy files" are popular features on outlaw boards, detailing how to build pipe-bombs, how to make Molotovs, how to brew methedrine and LSD, how to break and enter buildings, how to blow up bridges, the easiest ways to kill someone with a single blow of a blunt object -- and these boards bug straight people a lot. Never mind that all this data is publicly available in public libraries where it is protected by the First Amendment. There is something about its being on a computer -- where any teenage geek with a modem and keyboard can read it, and print it out, and spread it around, free as air -- there is something about that, that is creepy.

"Brad" is a New Age pagan from Saint Louis who runs a service

known as "WEIRDBASE," available on an international network of boards called "FidoNet." Brad was mired in an interminable scandal when his readers formed a spontaneous underground railroad to help a New Age warlock smuggle his teenage daughter out of Texas, away from his fundamentalist Christian in-laws, who were utterly convinced that he had murdered his wife and intended to sacrifice his daughter to -- *Satan*! The scandal made local TV in Saint Louis. Cops came around and grilled Brad. The patchouli stench of Aleister Crowley hung heavy in the air. There was just no end to the hassle.

If you're into something goofy and dubious and you have a board about it, it can mean real trouble. Science-fiction game publisher Steve Jackson had his board seized in 1990. Some cryogenics people in California, who froze a woman for post-mortem preservation before she was officially, er, "dead," had their computers seized. People who sell dope-growing equipment have had their computers seized. In 1990, boards all over America went down: Illuminati, CLLI Code, Phoenix Project, Dr. Ripco. Computers are seized as "evidence," but since they can be kept indefinitely for study by police, this veers close to confiscation and punishment without trial. One good reason why Mitchell Kapor showed up at CyberView.

Mitch Kapor was the co-inventor of the mega-selling business program LOTUS 1-2-3 and the founder of the software giant, Lotus Development Corporation. He is currently the president of a newly-formed electronic civil liberties group, the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Kapor, now 40, customarily wears Hawaiian shirts and is your typical post-hippie cybernetic multimillionaire. He and EFF's chief legal counsel, "Johnny Mnemonic," had flown in for the gig in Kapor's private jet.

Kapor had been dragged willy-nilly into the toils of the digital underground when he received an unsolicited floppy-disk in the mail, from an outlaw group known as the "NuPrometheus League." These rascals (still not apprehended) had stolen confidential proprietary software from Apple Computer, Inc., and were distributing it far and wide in order to blow Apple's trade secrets and humiliate the company. Kapor assumed that the disk was a joke, or, more likely, a clever scheme to infect his machines with a computer virus.

But when the FBI showed up, at Apple's behest, Kapor was shocked at the extent of their naivete. Here were these well-dressed federal officials, politely "Mr. Kapor"- ing him right and left, ready to carry out a war to the knife against evil marauding "hackers." They didn't seem to grasp that "hackers" had built the entire personal computer industry. Jobs was a hacker, Wozniak too, even Bill Gates, the youngest billionaire in the history of America -- all "hackers." The new buttoned-down regime at Apple had blown its top, and as for the

feds, they were willing, but clueless. Well, let's be charitable -- the feds were "cluefully challenged." "Clue-impaired." "Differently clued...."

Back in the 70s (as Kapor recited to the hushed and respectful young hackers) he himself had practiced "software piracy" -- as those activities would be known today. Of course, back then, "computer software" hadn't been a major industry -- but today, "hackers" had police after them for doing things that the industry's own pioneers had pulled routinely. Kapor was irate about this. His own personal history, the lifestyle of his pioneering youth, was being smugly written out of the historical record by the latter-day corporate androids. Why, nowadays, people even blanched when Kapor forthrightly declared that he'd done LSD in the Sixties.

Quite a few of the younger hackers grew alarmed at this admission of Kapor's, and gazed at him in wonder, as if expecting him to explode.

"The law only has sledgehammers, when what we need are parking tickets and speeding tickets," Kapor said. Anti-hacker hysteria had gripped the nation in 1990. Huge law enforcement efforts had been mounted against illusory threats. In Washington DC, on the very day when the formation of the Electronic Frontier Foundation had been announced, a Congressional committee had been formally presented with the plotline of a thriller movie -- DIE HARD II, in which hacker terrorists seize an airport computer -- as if this Hollywood fantasy posed a clear and present danger to the American republic. A similar hacker thriller, WAR GAMES, had been presented to Congress in the mid-80s. Hysteria served no one's purposes, and created a stampede of foolish and unenforceable laws likely to do more harm than good.

Kapor didn't want to "paper over the differences" between his Foundation and the underground community. In the firm opinion of EFF, intruding into computers by stealth was morally wrong. Like stealing phone service, it deserved punishment. Not draconian ruthlessness, though. Not the ruination of a youngster's entire life.

After a lively and quite serious discussion of digital free-speech issues, the entire crew went to dinner at an Italian eatery in the local mall, on Kapor's capacious charge-tab. Having said his piece and listened with care, Kapor began glancing at his watch. Back in Boston, his six-year-old son was waiting at home, with a new Macintosh computer-game to tackle. A quick phone-call got the jet warmed up, and Kapor and his lawyer split town.

With the forces of conventionality -- such as they were -- out of the picture, the Legion of Doom began to get heavily into "Mexican Flags." A Mexican Flag is a lethal, multi-layer concoction of red grenadine, white tequila and green creme-de-menthe. It is topped with

a thin layer of 150 proof rum, set afire, and sucked up through straws.

The formal fire-and-straw ritual soon went by the board as things began to disintegrate. Wandering from room to room, the crowd became howlingly rowdy, though without creating trouble, as the CyberView crowd had wisely taken over an entire wing of the hotel.

"Crimson Death," a cheerful, baby-faced young hardware expert with a pierced nose and three earrings, attempted to hack the hotel's private phone system, but only succeeded in cutting off phone service to his own room.

Somebody announced there was a cop guarding the next wing of the hotel. Mild panic ensued. Drunken hackers crowded to the window.

A gentleman slipped quietly through the door of the next wing wearing a short terrycloth bathrobe and spangled silk boxer shorts.

Spouse-swappers had taken over the neighboring wing of the hotel, and were holding a private weekend orgy. It was a St Louis swingers' group. It turned out that the cop guarding the entrance way was an off-duty swinging cop. He'd angrily threatened to clobber Doc Holiday. Another swinger almost punched-out "Bill from RNOC," whose prurient hacker curiosity, naturally, knew no bounds.

It was not much of a contest. As the weekend wore on and the booze flowed freely, the hackers slowly but thoroughly infiltrated the hapless swingers, who proved surprisingly open and tolerant. At one point, they even invited a group of hackers to join in their revels, though "they had to bring their own women."

Despite the pulverizing effects of numerous Mexican Flags, Comsec Data Security seemed to be having very little trouble on that score. They'd vanished downtown brandishing their full-color photo in TIME magazine, and returned with an impressive depth-core sample of St Louis womanhood, one of whom, in an idle moment, broke into Doc Holiday's room, emptied his wallet, and stole his Sony tape recorder and all his shirts.

Events stopped dead for the season's final episode of STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION. The show passed in rapt attention -- then it was back to harassing the swingers. Bill from RNOC cunningly out-waited the swinger guards, infiltrated the building, and decorated all the closed doors with globs of mustard from a pump-bottle.

In the hungover glare of Sunday morning, a hacker proudly showed me a large handlettered placard reading PRIVATE -- STOP, which he had stolen from the unlucky swingers on his way out of their wing. Somehow, he had managed to work his way into the building, and had suavely ingratiated himself into a bedroom, where he had engaged a swinging airline ticket-agent in a long and most informative conversation about the security of airport computer terminals. The

ticket agent's wife, at the time, was sprawled on the bed engaging in desultory oral sex with a third gentleman. It transpired that she herself did a lot of work on LOTUS 1-2-3. She was thrilled to hear that the program's inventor, Mitch Kapor, had been in that very hotel, that very weekend.

Mitch Kapor. Right over there? Here in St Louis? Wow. Isn't life strange.